Knowing the Student: Professional Judgement, Authenticity and Academic Standards in the Age of Generative AI

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ABSTRACT

Questions of authorship, authenticity and evidence of learning have moved to the forefront of debate within higher education as Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) becomes increasingly embedded in teaching, learning and assessment. While much existing research has focused on student use of AI, institutional policy and academic integrity, far less is known about how educators themselves interpret and respond to these uncertainties in their everyday practice.

This study explores how lecturers and Personal Academic Tutors (PATs) working within a UK higher education partnership provider understand and respond to GenAI. Drawing on an interpretivist qualitative case study approach, two semi-structured focus groups were conducted with academic staff involved in franchised higher education provision. The data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

Analysis of the discussions produced four interrelated themes: educational support and mediation; the preservation of intellectual labour; academic judgement under conditions of uncertainty; and contesting the meaning of educational value. Although participants recognised potential benefits associated with AI, discussions repeatedly returned to concerns about assessment credibility, authentic learning and confidence in standards. Particularly striking was the extent to which participants relied not on detection technologies but on their accumulated knowledge of students when evaluating authenticity and achievement.

The study suggests that GenAI has brought renewed attention to longstanding questions about what assessment represents and how learning can be evidenced within higher education. Rather than treating AI solely as an academic integrity issue, participants understood it as challenging confidence in assessment as evidence of learning. The findings suggest that professional judgement increasingly involves evaluating the credibility of learning evidence alongside the quality of student work. The study contributes to debates concerning academic judgement, assessment validity and standards assurance within contemporary higher education, particularly in partnership provision.

Keywords: Assessment Validity; Authenticity; Educational Legitimacy; Interpretive Judgement; Partnership Governance; Standards Assurance

INTRODUCTION

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) has rapidly become part of everyday life within higher education. Tools such as ChatGPT have moved from being technological novelties to resources that students and staff routinely encounter in teaching, learning and assessment. Their emergence has intensified debates about learning, assessment, authorship and academic standards (Kasneci et al., 2023; Perkins, 2023).

Responses to GenAI have been mixed. Some scholars highlight opportunities relating to accessibility, personalised learning and academic support (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Tlili et al., 2023). Others draw attention to concerns about critical thinking, independent learning and the credibility of assessment evidence (Cotton et al., 2024; Perkins, 2023). These debates extend beyond technology itself and raise broader questions about what should count as evidence of learning in higher education.

Such questions place academic judgement under greater scrutiny. Assessment has never depended solely on criteria and procedures; it also relies upon interpretation and professional judgement (Sadler, 1989; Shay, 2004). GenAI appears to complicate these processes by making questions of authorship, authenticity and achievement more difficult to determine.

Despite the rapid growth of research on GenAI, comparatively little attention has been given to how educators navigate these issues in practice. Existing work focuses largely on technological capability, student use and institutional responses (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Kasneci et al., 2023; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). Less is known about how academic staff interpret uncertainty and make standards-related judgements in increasingly AI-mediated environments.

This gap is particularly relevant within higher education partnership provision. In these settings, teaching, quality assurance and academic oversight may be distributed across multiple institutions, creating additional layers of accountability and complexity (QAA, 2023). Yet little research has explored how educators working within such environments understand and respond to GenAI.

Against this backdrop, the study explores how lecturers and Personal Academic Tutors (PATs) within a UK higher education partner institution understand and respond to GenAI. Rather than focusing solely on attitudes towards AI, the study examines how educators make sense of authenticity, academic standards and learning in the context of growing technological uncertainty.

The study was guided by four research questions:

- How do lecturers and Personal Academic Tutors understand generative artificial intelligence within their professional roles?
- What educational opportunities and risks do academic staff associate with the use of GenAI in teaching, assessment and student support?
- How do lecturers and Personal Academic Tutors judge the implications of GenAI for academic integrity and academic standards?
- How do institutional expectations and organisational contexts shape academic staff responses to GenAI?

The paper argues that GenAI cannot be understood solely through the lens of technology or academic integrity. For the educators in this study, AI frequently became a way of discussing learning, authenticity, judgement and educational value. Understanding these perspectives offers insight into how academic standards are interpreted and maintained within contemporary higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Generative Artificial Intelligence and the Changing Landscape of Higher Education

The emergence of ChatGPT brought artificial intelligence from the margins of educational technology research into mainstream higher education practice. Although AI had already been applied to areas such as learning analytics and intelligent tutoring systems, the arrival of generative AI shifted attention towards teaching, assessment and academic work itself (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Kasneci et al., 2023).

This shift is reflected in recent scholarship. Dwivedi et al. (2023) and Tlili et al. (2023) identify a range of educational opportunities associated with GenAI, including accessibility and learning support. Similar observations are made by Moorhouse et al. (2023), who note that universities have already begun adapting assessment policies and institutional guidance in response to these developments.

However, more optimistic accounts are not universally shared. Cotton et al. (2024) raise concerns about the relationship between AI-generated outputs and the learning processes they appear to represent. Their discussion suggests that students may be able to produce academically credible work without necessarily engaging in the intellectual activity traditionally associated with higher education. From this perspective, the issue is not merely technological but educational.

Much of the literature reflects a tension between the opportunities associated with GenAI and concerns regarding authenticity, critical thinking and assessment credibility (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Tlili et al., 2023; Cotton et al., 2024). Yet this distinction can sometimes oversimplify the debate. Both positions tend to begin with assumptions about what higher education should prioritise, whether that is widening access to support or preserving forms of intellectual engagement traditionally associated with learning.

A limitation across much of the emerging literature is the tendency to focus on the implications of AI rather than the experiences of those responding to it. Considerably less attention has been paid to how educators themselves make sense of these competing pressures in everyday practice. This omission is important because decisions relating to assessment, standards and learning are ultimately interpreted and enacted by academic staff rather than by technologies alone.

Rather than creating entirely new educational questions, GenAI appears to intensify existing ones. Questions concerning evidence of learning, academic standards and intellectual effort predate AI. What has changed is the urgency with which these questions are now being asked.

Academic Integrity, Assessment Validity and Educational Legitimacy

Academic integrity, commonly understood as a commitment to principles of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility and courage (International Center for Academic Integrity, 2021), has become one of the dominant themes in discussions surrounding GenAI. Concerns about plagiarism, authorship, contract cheating and assessment security appeared quickly across institutional policies and academic debate following the release of ChatGPT (Perkins, 2023; Cotton et al., 2024). Recent reviews suggest that while GenAI may enhance educational engagement and efficiency, it continues to generate substantial concerns relating to academic dishonesty, academic integrity and institutional responses to AI use within higher education (Bittle and El-Gayar, 2025). The ability of AI systems to generate academically credible text inevitably raises questions about the relationship between submitted work and student learning.

Many responses have focused on misconduct, regulation and the appropriate use of AI within assessed work (Perkins, 2023). While these concerns are important, they do not fully capture the educational challenges raised by GenAI. As Cotton et al. (2024) note, AI complicates the distinction between assistance and authorship. A submission may satisfy assessment requirements while providing limited evidence of the learning processes traditionally assumed to underpin it.

This tension highlights an important distinction that is sometimes overlooked within current debates. Academic integrity and assessment validity are related but different concerns. Academic integrity focuses on honesty and compliance, whereas assessment validity concerns the extent to which assessment provides evidence of learning (Boud and Falchikov, 2007; Perkins, 2023; Cotton et al., 2024). A student may comply with institutional requirements while still relying heavily on technological assistance. Equally, the presence of AI does not automatically indicate misconduct. Questions of learning therefore cannot be resolved through integrity frameworks alone (Perkins, 2023; Cotton et al., 2024).

These concerns resonate with Boud and Falchikov's (2007) argument that assessment should provide meaningful evidence of capability and learning. Their work predates GenAI, yet the issues they raise have become increasingly relevant. If AI can shape substantial aspects of assessed work, the challenge is no longer limited to detecting misuse. The more difficult question concerns what assessment outputs can legitimately be taken as evidence of student understanding.

For this reason, GenAI is best understood as more than an academic integrity issue. It raises broader questions about authenticity, legitimacy and educational value. At stake is not simply whether students are using AI appropriately, but how confidence in learning can be sustained when traditional assumptions about authorship and assessment evidence become less certain.

Academic Judgement and the Interpretation of Standards

Questions about GenAI are, at their core, questions about academic judgement. Assessment has never been a purely technical process. Decisions about quality, achievement and standards rely not only on criteria and procedures but also on the interpretations of those applying them (Sadler, 1989; Shay, 2004).

Much of the assessment literature challenges the idea that standards exist as fixed entities that can be applied objectively. Sadler (1989) argues that criteria alone cannot eliminate the need for professional judgement because assessors must still interpret quality and determine whether standards have been met. This position is extended by Shay (2004), who locates judgement within disciplinary and institutional contexts, and by Bloxham et al. (2016), who highlight the role of moderation, dialogue and shared professional understandings in maintaining standards. Despite their different emphases, all three authors reject the view of assessment as a purely procedural activity.

An important implication of this work is that standards are enacted rather than simply applied (Sadler, 1989; Shay, 2004; Bloxham et al., 2016). Consistency does not arise because interpretation has been removed from assessment. Rather, it emerges through shared understandings of quality and professional judgement within academic communities.

Tai et al. (2018) approach this issue through the concept of evaluative judgement, defined as the ability to make informed decisions about quality. Although developed primarily in relation to students, the concept also has relevance for educators. Academic staff routinely make judgements about quality and achievement in situations where standards require interpretation rather than mechanical application (Sadler, 1989; Shay, 2004; Tai et al., 2018).

This literature becomes particularly significant when considered alongside GenAI. Traditional assessment practices depend, either explicitly or implicitly, on assumptions about authorship, originality and the relationship between student work and student learning. GenAI unsettles these assumptions by making it more difficult to determine how work has been produced and what it demonstrates about understanding (Cotton et al., 2024; Perkins, 2023).

A notable tension emerges here. Technologies are often associated with automation and standardisation, yet the assessment literature points towards the continuing importance of human judgement. As certainty regarding authorship and authenticity becomes less secure, questions of interpretation and professional judgement may become increasingly important (Sadler, 1989; Shay, 2004). Questions concerning authenticity cannot always be resolved through procedures or technological tools alone.

While the importance of judgement is well established within the assessment literature, less attention has been given to how educators exercise judgement when uncertainty relates not only to quality but also to authenticity and evidence of learning. Understanding how academic staff navigate these issues has therefore become increasingly important in AI-mediated educational environments.

Partnership Provision, Governance and Accountability

Partnership provision adds a further layer of complexity to discussions about GenAI because responsibility for teaching, assessment and academic oversight is distributed across institutions. Students may be taught by one provider while receiving an award from another, creating environments in which standards are maintained through multiple systems of governance and accountability (QAA, 2023; Office for Students, 2024; National Audit Office, 2024).

Despite growing interest in GenAI, most research has examined the issue at sector level, focusing on assessment, academic integrity and institutional responses (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Kasneci et al., 2023; Cotton et al., 2024). Much less attention has been given to the organisational settings in which standards-related decisions are made. This omission is significant because the challenges associated with AI are unlikely to be experienced uniformly across different higher education contexts.

Policy and regulatory documents consistently emphasise the importance of maintaining equivalent standards across partnership arrangements (QAA, 2023; Office for Students, 2024; National Audit Office, 2024). Similar concerns are reflected in recent attention from the Office for Students (2024) and the National Audit Office (2024), both of which highlight accountability and standards assurance within franchised provision. However, these discussions tend to focus on institutional responsibilities rather than the practical realities of educational judgement.

This distinction becomes important when considered alongside scholarship on assessment and standards. If standards depend partly on interpretation and professional judgement (Sadler, 1989; Shay, 2004; Bloxham et al., 2016), then policy frameworks alone cannot resolve questions concerning authorship, authenticity or appropriate uses of AI. Educators remain responsible for interpreting standards in situations that are often ambiguous and context dependent.

Research examining how academic staff navigate these issues within partnership provision remains limited. As a result, relatively little is known about how educators working across multiple layers of accountability make decisions about authenticity, responsibility and academic standards in increasingly AI-mediated environments. This represents an important gap in the current literature.

Conceptual Framework and Research Gap

Three themes run through the literature reviewed in this chapter.

First, research on GenAI has expanded rapidly, with much of the discussion focusing on technological capabilities, student use, pedagogical applications and institutional responses (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Kasneci et al., 2023; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). Comparatively less attention has been given to how educators navigate uncertainty surrounding standards, authenticity and achievement in everyday practice.

Second, discussions of AI have been dominated by concerns about academic integrity, plagiarism and authorship (Perkins, 2023; Cotton et al., 2024). However, the literature also points towards broader questions concerning assessment validity, authenticity and the credibility of learning evidence (Boud and Falchikov, 2007; Cotton et al., 2024). The issue is increasingly not only whether misconduct has occurred, but what assessment outputs can reasonably be interpreted as evidence of learning.

Third, scholarship on academic judgement consistently positions professional interpretation as central to educational decision-making (Sadler, 1989; Shay, 2004; Bloxham et al., 2016; Tai et al., 2018). Despite differences in emphasis, these authors share the view that standards are interpreted rather than mechanically applied. Yet relatively little research has explored how educators exercise judgement when uncertainty concerns authenticity and authorship as much as quality and performance.

A further gap relates to context. Partnership provision features prominently in policy discussions about accountability, governance and standards assurance (QAA, 2023; National Audit Office, 2024; Office for Students, 2024), yet remains comparatively underexplored within research examining educators' responses to GenAI.

Across these strands of literature, a common concern emerges: confidence in learning. Questions of AI, academic integrity, assessment validity and professional judgement all converge around the challenge of determining what student work represents when certainty becomes more difficult to establish.

Recent systematic reviews similarly identify questions of authorship, integrity, trust and detection as central challenges emerging from the integration of GenAI within higher education, reinforcing the need to understand how these issues are interpreted in practice by educators themselves (Slimi, 2026).

This study is informed by interpretive perspectives on academic judgement and assessment. Drawing particularly on Sadler's (1989) conception of judgement in assessment, Shay's (2004) understanding of assessment as a socially situated interpretive act, and Boud and Falchikov's (2007) work on assessment

validity, the study conceptualises academic standards not as fixed entities but as judgements negotiated through professional interpretation. These perspectives provide the theoretical lens through which educators' accounts of authenticity, credibility and evidence of learning are interpreted in AI-mediated educational environments.

This study responds to that gap by examining how lecturers and Personal Academic Tutors within a UK higher education partner institution understand GenAI, interpret uncertainty and negotiate questions of authenticity, standards and educational value in their professional practice.

METHODOLOGY

This study sought to understand how lecturers and Personal Academic Tutors (PATs) make sense of the growing presence of GenAI within higher education. Given this focus, an interpretivist qualitative approach was adopted. The study was not concerned with measuring attitudes or testing predefined relationships. Rather, it sought to explore how educators understood, negotiated and responded to questions relating to authenticity, academic standards, professional responsibility and educational value. Such issues are inherently interpretive and are most effectively examined through participants' experiences and professional practice (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

The research was conducted within a UK higher education partnership provider delivering Foundation Year (Level 3) and undergraduate programmes through partnership arrangements with awarding universities. The institution operates within partnership and franchised arrangements in which academic delivery, quality assurance and standards oversight involve multiple stakeholders. This context was particularly relevant because questions relating to accountability, governance and academic standards have become increasingly prominent in discussions concerning GenAI.

A qualitative case study design was employed. As Yin (2018) argues, case study research is especially useful when seeking to understand contemporary phenomena within the settings in which they occur. In the present study, questions surrounding AI, academic standards and professional judgement could not be easily separated from the institutional environment in which educators were working. The case study approach therefore provided an opportunity to examine these issues within their natural organisational context rather than in isolation.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling. An email invitation was circulated to academic staff within the institution and participation was entirely voluntary. The intention was not to achieve statistical representation but to engage individuals whose professional responsibilities placed them in a position to comment meaningfully on the educational implications of GenAI. Two focus groups were conducted. The first involved seven lecturers responsible for teaching, assessment and feedback. The second involved nine Personal Academic Tutors (PATs), academic staff whose responsibilities centred on academic guidance, student progression, academic skills development and pastoral support throughout students' programmes of study. Including both groups made it possible to explore whether different professional roles shaped responses to AI while also identifying areas of common concern.

Participants brought a broad range of professional and disciplinary experience. Lecturer experience ranged from approximately 18 months to 17 years, while PAT experience ranged from six months to six years. Lecturers represented Business Management, Digital Marketing and Health and Social Care disciplines and were involved in teaching and assessment from Foundation Year (Level 3) through to Level 6 undergraduate programmes. Participants worked across three university partnership arrangements. Among the lecturers, five held doctoral qualifications and two held master's degrees. Among the PATs, seven held master's degrees and two held bachelor's degrees. Both focus groups included a mix of male and female participants.

The sample size was considered sufficient for an in-depth qualitative exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives. Consistent with the interpretivist orientation of the study, emphasis was placed on the richness and depth of discussion rather than statistical representativeness. The inclusion of participants from

different academic roles, disciplines and levels of professional experience enabled a broad range of perspectives to be explored within the institutional case.

Data were generated through semi-structured focus groups. This method was considered particularly appropriate because the study was interested not only in individual perspectives but also in how participants collectively discussed, negotiated and challenged one another's views. Krueger and Casey (2015) note that focus groups provide valuable insight into how opinions are formed and expressed through interaction. A discussion guide informed by the literature provided direction while allowing participants the freedom to pursue issues they regarded as important. Topics included academic integrity, assessment validity, student use of AI, professional responsibility, institutional guidance and wider questions concerning the future of higher education. The focus groups lasted between 95 and 100 minutes, were audio recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

The data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). This approach aligned closely with the interpretivist orientation of the study because it recognises the active role of the researcher in the construction of meaning. Rather than treating themes as objective entities waiting to be discovered, RTA views analysis as an interpretive process shaped through engagement with the data.

Analysis began through repeated reading of the transcripts in order to develop familiarity with the dataset and participants' discussions. Initial codes were generated and refined through an iterative process of comparison, reflection and interpretation. As patterns of meaning became clearer, related codes were brought together into broader themes that captured shared concerns and recurring ideas across both focus groups. Issues relating to authenticity, assessment credibility, academic standards, professional judgement and educational value emerged consistently throughout the dataset and ultimately informed the thematic structure presented in the findings.

In addition to thematic development, attention was given to similarities and differences between the lecturer and PAT focus groups. This comparative analysis enabled exploration of the extent to which themes reflected shared professional understandings or role-specific perspectives. Attention was also paid to viewpoints that challenged or complicated emerging interpretations, ensuring that the analysis remained sensitive to variation, nuance and areas of tension within participants' accounts.

The analysis was conducted manually rather than through qualitative data analysis software. Given the size and scope of the dataset, manual coding was considered appropriate and supported close engagement with participants' contributions throughout the analytical process. Emphasis remained on sustained immersion in the data and iterative interpretation rather than software-assisted data management. Analytical notes were maintained throughout in order to document emerging ideas, decisions and reflections during the development of themes.

The researcher occupied the position of an insider researcher within the wider organisational context. Familiarity with institutional processes, practices and culture provided valuable contextual understanding throughout both data collection and analysis. However, insider status also created the possibility that aspects of organisational life could be taken for granted or that prior professional experiences could influence interpretation. As Mercer (2007) notes, insider researchers often benefit from contextual knowledge and access while simultaneously needing to remain attentive to issues of familiarity and bias.

For this reason, reflexive practice was maintained throughout the study. Notes were recorded during data collection and analysis in order to critically examine how existing assumptions, professional knowledge and organisational experience may have shaped both the research process and the interpretation of findings. Deliberate efforts were made to ensure that analytical decisions remained grounded in participants' contributions rather than the researcher's prior understandings of the institutional environment.

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the British Educational Research Association's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2024). Participants received information

about the study prior to participation, informed consent was obtained and individuals were reminded of their right to withdraw before the commencement of analysis. Participation was voluntary and no incentives were offered. Given that the study involved academic staff discussing professional experiences and posed minimal risk, ethical considerations focused on informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and voluntary participation throughout the research process. To protect anonymity, identifying information was removed during transcription and reporting, and participants are represented through coded identifiers throughout the findings.

Questions concerning quality and rigour were considered through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through sustained engagement with participants and repeated immersion in the data during analysis. Dependability was supported through maintaining an audit trail documenting key methodological and analytical decisions. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive practice and the inclusion of participant quotations that allow readers to evaluate the relationship between the data and the interpretations presented. Finally, sufficient contextual detail has been provided to enable readers to judge the potential relevance of the findings to comparable higher education environments.

FINDINGS

Introduction

Analysis of the lecturer (n = 7) and Personal Academic Tutor (PAT) (n = 9) focus groups generated four interrelated themes: (1) Reframing Educational Support Through AI, (2) The Preservation of Intellectual Labour, (3) Academic Judgement Under Conditions of Uncertainty, and (4) Contesting the Meaning of Educational Value.

Although discussions initially focused on practical experiences of GenAI, participants consistently moved beyond technical considerations and engaged with broader questions concerning authenticity, intellectual effort, academic standards, and educational purpose. Across both groups, AI was rarely discussed as a technology in isolation. Instead, participants situated it within wider debates about what constitutes legitimate learning and how authentic achievement should be recognised within higher education.

A notable finding was the extent of convergence between lecturers and PATs. Despite occupying different professional positions, participants repeatedly returned to common concerns relating to critical thinking, authenticity, professional responsibility, and educational quality. Responses to GenAI therefore appeared to be shaped less by organisational role than by shared academic commitments and educational values.

Table 1 presents the themes and subthemes generated through the analysis of both focus groups.

Table 1. Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subthemes
1. Reframing Educational Support Through AI	1.1 Translating Academic Complexity 1.2 Accessibility and Inclusion 1.3 Enhancing Professional Practice
2. The Preservation of Intellectual Labour	2.1 Critical Thinking Under Pressure 2.2 Dependency and Cognitive Risk 2.3 Learning Beyond Answer Generation

3. Academic Judgement Under Conditions of Uncertainty	3.1 Knowing the Student 3.2 Recognising Authenticity 3.3 Judgement Beyond Detection Technologies
4. Contesting the Meaning of Educational Value	4.1 Productivity as Progress 4.2 Quality Versus Efficiency 4.3 Educational Trade-Offs

To illustrate the relationship between participants' accounts and the analytical interpretations developed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis, Table 2 summarises the principal themes and their associated meanings.

Table 2. From Participant Accounts to Analytical Interpretation

Theme	What Participants Discussed	Interpretation
Reframing Educational Support Through AI	Simplified briefs, clearer explanations, resource development	AI was valued primarily as a mediator of educational access rather than a productivity tool
The Preservation of Intellectual Labour	Critical thinking, dependency, and cognitive effort	Concerns centred on maintaining a meaningful relationship between learning and intellectual work
Academic Judgement Under Conditions of Uncertainty	Authenticity, authorship, and knowing students	Professional judgement emerged as the principal response to educational uncertainty
Contesting the Meaning of Educational Value	Efficiency, productivity, and quality	Debates surrounding AI reflected competing understandings of educational purpose

Theme 1: Reframing Educational Support Through AI

Participants frequently described AI as a resource capable of enhancing educational support. However, what emerged from the data was not a straightforward narrative of efficiency. Rather, AI was valued because of its perceived ability to translate complexity into accessibility.

Translating Academic Complexity

Several participants described using AI to simplify assessment requirements and communicate expectations more clearly to students. One lecturer explained:

"I would ask AI to help me give me like a one-page summary of the assessment brief, which I do then share with my students. They do tend to find it useful, and it gives them a quick grasp and understanding of what the assessment is about. So that is like an additional support material that I use to support the students." (L5)

Participants were clear that this was not being used as a substitute for teaching. Rather, AI was positioned as helping students engage with academic requirements that were often perceived as difficult to navigate.

Accessibility and Inclusion

A recurring feature of participants' accounts was the belief that AI could improve accessibility. Discussion frequently focused on removing barriers between institutional expectations and student understanding.

Rather than celebrating technological sophistication, participants often emphasised clarity, comprehension, and engagement. AI was viewed as valuable when it enabled students to access information in forms that felt more manageable and less intimidating.

Similar views emerged among PATs, who frequently discussed AI in terms of accessibility and student engagement rather than technological innovation. As one participant explained:

"A significant number of our students face challenges not due to a lack of capability, but rather because they sometimes find it difficult to comprehend what is required of them. If AI can simplify complex information, it may enhance student engagement with their studies." (P4)

A second PAT similarly emphasised understanding rather than substitution:

"I perceive value in AI when it aids students in making sense of information that could otherwise be daunting. It has the potential to serve as an initial step towards understanding, rather than replacing the learning journey itself." (P2)

Enhancing Professional Practice

Similar views emerged in discussions of resource development and lesson preparation. As one participant explained:

“Generative AI is more like a creative personal assistant. It helps to analyse information, spot trends and simplify information. As a lecturer, this is a tool that exists to provide extra teaching support.” (L6)

Significantly, participants rarely celebrated AI simply because it saved time. Rather, efficiency was valued because it enabled additional educational support to be offered. Participants therefore valued AI less for its technical capabilities than for its capacity to reduce barriers between academic expectations and student understanding.

Viewed in this way, the significance of AI extended beyond productivity and towards educational mediation. Rather than functioning primarily as a technological innovation, AI was frequently positioned as a bridge between academic complexity and student comprehension. In this respect, participants appeared to view AI less as a productivity technology and more as a form of educational mediation through which academic expectations could be translated into forms that felt more accessible and understandable to students. The educational value of AI therefore appeared to reside not in replacing educational processes but in mediating access to them.

Theme 2: The Preservation of Intellectual Labour

While participants recognised the potential benefits of AI, discussion repeatedly returned to concerns regarding intellectual effort. The issue was not simply whether students used AI but whether AI altered the relationship between learning and thinking.

Critical Thinking Under Pressure

One lecturer articulated this concern directly:

“They are not using their brain. They are not actually using their own understanding or critical thinking. Education is about critical thinking. It is about collaboration and understanding before you move forward.

Look, get the information from the machine, and say, 'Right, I have the answer.' Then if you have to critically analyse your findings, how are you going to do that?" (L2)

Participants consistently distinguished between generating answers and developing understanding. The concern was not the accuracy of AI-generated outputs but whether students remained intellectually engaged in the process of learning.

Dependency and Cognitive Risk

Another participant noted:

"Perhaps the question should be how we help students benefit from using AI so that they remain critical. There is nothing worse than teaching students who are not critical. If AI is not properly governed, it will remove criticality in the classroom." (L4)

Concerns about dependency surfaced across both focus groups, particularly when discussion turned towards critical thinking and analytical development.

PATs articulated similar concerns. One participant emphasised that the central issue was not the use of AI itself but the potential loss of intellectual engagement:

"My worry lies not in students utilising AI, but in their failure to question the information presented to them. It remains essential for students to analyze, assess, and think critically about what they read." (P4)

Another participant highlighted the educational importance of uncertainty and independent judgement:

"There is a risk that students may become overly dependent on receiving immediate answers. A crucial aspect of higher education involves learning how to navigate uncertainty and cultivate personal judgement." (P8)

Learning Beyond Answer Generation

Importantly, these concerns were not framed as opposition to technology. Indeed, many participants actively used AI themselves. Rather, they reflected a broader anxiety regarding the preservation of intellectual labour.

Across both groups, meaningful learning was repeatedly associated with effort, reflection, engagement, and struggle. The issue, therefore, was not AI itself but the possibility that educational legitimacy could become detached from visible intellectual effort. Participants appeared concerned that higher education might increasingly reward outcomes while becoming less certain about the intellectual processes through which those outcomes had been achieved.

Theme 3: Academic Judgement Under Conditions of Uncertainty

Across both focus groups, participants repeatedly described AI as creating uncertainty regarding authorship, authenticity, and achievement. Rather than responding to this uncertainty through technological solutions, participants relied heavily upon professional judgement grounded in their knowledge of students.

Table 3 summarises the principal sources of judgement participants drew upon when evaluating questions of authenticity.

Table 3. How Participants Constructed Authenticity

Source of Judgement	Participant Examples	Interpretation
Knowledge of student ability	Familiarity with language, writing style and classroom engagement	Authenticity was evaluated relationally rather than technologically

Observation over time	Awareness of progression and consistency in performance	Judgement drew upon longitudinal understanding of learners
Professional experience	Recognition of unusual patterns and discrepancies	Expertise functioned as a standards-assurance mechanism
AI text characteristics	Formulaic language and predictable structure	Used cautiously and rarely treated as definitive evidence

Knowing the Student

One participant explained:

“When you understand your learners, it is easier for you to spot something that is out of the ordinary when they write. For instance, if I understand one of my learners to have a poor understanding of the English language and they produce average-standard documentation, I will understand that there is a potential case of academic misconduct.” (L6)

Similar observations emerged from the PAT focus group. One participant observed:

"Since we accompany students throughout their academic paths, we gain insights into their communication styles, the obstacles they encounter, and their typical approaches to learning. This understanding becomes vital when inconsistencies arise suddenly." (P2)

Another PAT commented:

"Over time, you develop familiarity with your students. You recognize their strengths, levels of confidence, and engagement patterns. Often it is not a single assignment that raises concerns; instead, it's when something deviates from your previous observations." (P7)

Across both focus groups, participants described "knowing the student" as extending beyond simple familiarity. It included knowledge of students' written communication, spoken contributions, patterns of engagement, progression over time, confidence levels and typical approaches to assessment. Authenticity was therefore understood less as a feature of the submitted work itself and more as a judgement developed through sustained interaction with learners across multiple educational contexts.

Viewed in this way, "knowing the student" appeared to function as a form of authenticity evidence. Participants frequently drew upon knowledge developed through ongoing interaction, observing progression, engagement and performance over time when evaluating whether submitted work credibly reflected student learning.

Recognising Authenticity

Participants occasionally referred to characteristics they associated with AI-generated text.

As one participant observed:

“The way things are expressed, the way things are structured, is often a giveaway. There is a certain way that humans express themselves regardless of their level of articulation compared to when something is simply predicting what comes next.” (L7)

However, such indicators were rarely regarded as definitive evidence.

Judgement Beyond Detection Technologies

Significantly, participants did not place primary faith in AI-detection technologies. Instead, they relied upon

contextual, relational, and experiential forms of knowledge developed through sustained interaction with students.

Participants also described seeking guidance from institutional policies and partner-university expectations. However, they frequently suggested that formal guidance alone was insufficient to resolve questions of authenticity and standards, leading them to rely more heavily on professional judgement and contextual knowledge.

Importantly, participants did not describe professional judgement as unstructured or arbitrary. Judgements were typically informed by multiple sources of evidence, including prior interactions, observed progression, assessment history and professional dialogue with colleagues. Several participants emphasised that concerns about authenticity would rarely rest upon a single indicator in isolation.

The forms of uncertainty identified across participant accounts, and the corresponding professional responses are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. Forms of Uncertainty Identified by Participants

Area of Uncertainty	Participant Concern	Professional Response
Authorship	Who produced the work?	Knowledge of student performance and communication
Learning	Has genuine understanding occurred?	Interpretation of evidence through experience
Assessment	Does the submission represent achievement?	Contextual evaluation of student work
Standards	How should AI-assisted work be judged?	Professional dialogue and academic judgement

Across both focus groups, participants described relying primarily on their knowledge of students when making judgements about authenticity and achievement. Familiarity with performance, communication and engagement appeared to play a more significant role than technological detection tools in evaluating academic work.

In this respect, uncertainty did not weaken the role of academic judgement. Rather, uncertainty appeared to make such judgement increasingly indispensable.

Academic judgement therefore emerged not as a procedural activity but as an interpretive practice grounded in familiarity, experience, and context.

Theme 4: Contesting the Meaning of Educational Value

The most conceptually revealing discussions emerged when participants began debating whether efficiency should automatically be regarded as educational progress.

One participant challenged assumptions underpinning many positive claims about AI:

“If I were to sum up all these so-called benefits of these large language models from everything everybody has said so far, it would be productivity. However, my argument will be that it is a myopic view of productivity because you are only judging productivity based on a quantitative scale. You are not concerned about the actual quality of the productivity.” (L7)

In contrast, another participant stated:

"It just saves time and it is so much easier. Once I get the one-page summary, I also have another tool that turns that summary into a video explanation. It becomes quicker, more accessible, and more interactive for the students." (L5)

These contrasting viewpoints reveal an important tension. Participants were not ultimately debating AI. They were debating education. One perspective prioritised accessibility, responsiveness, and efficiency. The other prioritised depth, intellectual effort, and reflective engagement. Consequently, disagreements surrounding AI often reflected deeper assumptions about what higher education should value.

Rather than asking whether AI should be adopted, participants repeatedly returned to a more fundamental question:

What should count as meaningful learning in higher education?

Importantly, this question remained unresolved throughout the focus groups. Participants frequently connected discussions of AI to wider questions about educational values and purposes. Participants' discussions suggest that GenAI acts as a catalyst for wider reconsideration of educational values, revealing underlying tensions that may have existed long before AI entered higher education.

Table 5 provides a comparative overview of lecturer and PAT perspectives, highlighting both role-specific emphases and shared concerns.

Table 5. Comparison of Lecturer and PAT Perspectives

Area	Lecturers	PATs	Shared Concerns
Assessment and Standards	Strong emphasis on authenticity, authorship, and evidence of learning	Discussed indirectly through student support	Maintaining standards in an AI-mediated environment
Student Development	Focused on academic performance and learning outcomes	Strong emphasis on progression, confidence, and study practices	Supporting meaningful learning
Risks Associated with AI	Assessment validity, misconduct, and authenticity	Dependency, overreliance, and academic development	Critical thinking and responsible use
Professional Responsibility	Evaluating achievement and maintaining standards	Guiding students in appropriate use	Preserving educational quality and academic integrity

Comparative Analysis of Lecturer and PAT Perspectives

Despite differences in formal role, lecturers and PATs demonstrated substantial convergence in their responses to GenAI. Lecturers were more likely to discuss assessment, evidence of learning and standards, whereas PATs more frequently emphasised student development, dependency, and academic support. However, these differences were considerably less pronounced than anticipated.

Although lecturers and PATs frequently converged in their concerns regarding critical thinking, authenticity, professional responsibility and educational quality, they occasionally emphasised different aspects of these issues. Lecturers tended to focus more strongly on assessment, evidence and standards, whereas PATs more frequently framed their concerns through student development, dependency and progression. This suggests that professional role shaped the emphasis participants placed on particular concerns rather than their overall

orientation towards GenAI, with differences appearing more a matter of perspective than fundamentally opposing positions.

Rather than revealing fundamentally different perspectives, the data point towards a shared academic culture centred upon educational integrity, critical engagement, and confidence in standards. The anticipated distinction between assessment-focused and support-focused roles was therefore less evident than expected. Instead, participants appeared united by common concerns regarding how meaningful learning can be recognised and defended within increasingly AI-mediated educational environments.

Negative Case Analysis

Although many participants recognised the potential benefits of GenAI, several accounts complicated this generally positive narrative. These participants questioned assumptions concerning productivity, efficiency and technological progress, drawing attention to issues of quality, intellectual effort and educational purpose. Rather than rejecting AI outright, they challenged the idea that convenience should automatically be equated with educational improvement.

These contributions disrupted moments of emerging consensus and exposed assumptions that otherwise may have remained implicit. In doing so, they highlighted the presence of competing educational philosophies within the dataset and challenged the assumption that efficiency should necessarily be regarded as educational progress.

The negative case therefore strengthened the analysis by demonstrating that participants were not simply divided between supporters and critics of AI. Rather, they differed in their assumptions regarding the purpose of higher education itself.

Looking across the themes, participants consistently described GenAI in ways that extended beyond technology itself. Discussions repeatedly returned to questions of authenticity, intellectual effort, professional responsibility and educational purpose. Although participants recognised the potential benefits of AI, there was widespread agreement that professional judgement remains central to higher education practice.

Across both focus groups, discussions of assessment, feedback, accessibility and misconduct frequently evolved into broader debates concerning educational value, intellectual effort and the purposes of higher education. Collectively, the themes suggest that the challenge facing higher education may not be how to detect AI, but how to sustain confidence in academic judgement when traditional indicators of learning become increasingly uncertain.

DISCUSSION

Interpreted through the lens of academic judgement and assessment validity, participants' accounts indicate that GenAI challenges not only academic integrity but also confidence in learning as evidence of achievement.

Beyond Academic Integrity: GenAI and the Question of Educational Legitimacy

Although participants acknowledged concerns about plagiarism, authorship and misconduct, these issues rarely remained central for long. Discussion repeatedly shifted towards a more fundamental question: whether assessment could still be trusted as evidence of learning.

This finding suggests that GenAI is not simply an academic integrity challenge. While existing debates have focused heavily on misconduct and authorship (Perkins, 2023; Cotton et al., 2024; Bittle and El-Gayar, 2025), participants were more concerned about what academic work could legitimately be said to represent. A polished submission no longer automatically signified understanding, effort or intellectual engagement.

In this respect, the findings support Boud and Falchikov's (2007) argument that assessment should provide meaningful evidence of learning rather than merely record performance. Participants repeatedly associated

higher education with critical thinking, reflection and intellectual effort, echoing concerns raised by Cotton et al. (2024) regarding the potential separation of educational outputs from the learning processes they are assumed to represent.

Importantly, participants did not reject AI. Rather, they distinguished between AI as a support for learning and AI as a substitute for learning. The central issue was therefore not technological adoption but educational legitimacy. GenAI appears to have intensified a longstanding question within higher education: what should count as convincing evidence of learning? This finding is consistent with recent reviews highlighting growing concerns relating to authorship, trust, integrity and the implications of AI for higher education assessment and learning (Slimi, 2026).

Academic Judgement Under Conditions of AI-Mediated Uncertainty

Participants placed considerably more trust in professional judgement than in technological detection systems. Rather than relying primarily on AI-detection tools, they drew upon familiarity with students, contextual knowledge and accumulated professional experience when evaluating authenticity and achievement.

This finding supports long-standing arguments that standards depend on interpretation rather than procedure alone (Sadler, 1989; Shay, 2004; Bloxham et al., 2016). However, the findings also extend this literature and resonate with Tai et al.'s (2018) concept of evaluative judgement. Participants appeared to be making judgements not only about quality but also about credibility. Questions of authenticity, authorship and evidence of learning became part of the assessment process itself.

A notable paradox emerges here. AI is often presented as reducing dependence on human judgement through automation, standardisation and technological assistance. Participants described the opposite experience. As certainty surrounding authorship, authenticity and learning becomes more difficult to establish, professional interpretation appears to become increasingly important rather than less. The challenge was not simply identifying AI use but determining what student work could reasonably be understood to represent. In this respect, AI-mediated uncertainty may strengthen rather than diminish the role of academic judgement in standards assurance.

Viewed in this way, GenAI does not simply create new assessment challenges. It exposes the extent to which confidence in standards has always depended upon professional interpretation, contextual understanding and informed judgement. What has changed is not the existence of judgement, but the conditions under which it is exercised.

However, this increased reliance on professional judgement also raises important questions concerning consistency, transparency and the potential for uneven interpretation across contexts (Bloxham et al., 2016). Participants frequently described drawing upon knowledge of students' engagement, communication patterns, progression and assessment history when evaluating authenticity. While such contextual understanding may strengthen confidence in judgement, it also highlights an enduring tension within standards assurance: the need to balance professional discretion with fairness, consistency and accountability. The findings therefore suggest that relational knowledge of students may increasingly function as a form of authenticity evidence in AI-mediated assessment environments. This does not replace assessment criteria or institutional procedures. Rather, it supplements them by providing contextual information through which academic work is interpreted and evaluated. The challenge for higher education institutions is therefore not how to remove judgement from standards assurance processes, but how to ensure that such judgement remains transparent, accountable and consistently applied across contexts.

Negotiating Academic Standards in Partnership Provision

The partnership context adds further complexity to these discussions. Existing policy frameworks emphasise accountability, standards assurance and regulatory compliance (QAA, 2023; Office for Students, 2024;

National Audit Office, 2024). Participants, however, described standards less as fixed rules and more as practices requiring continual interpretation.

Questions relating to authenticity, acceptable uses of AI and evidence of learning rarely appeared straightforward. Instead, participants described balancing institutional requirements with professional judgement. This supports Bloxham et al.'s (2016) argument that standards are maintained through professional dialogue and interpretation rather than documentation alone.

The findings therefore suggest that confidence in standards depends not only on governance structures but also on educators' capacity to make reasoned judgements under conditions of uncertainty. This may be particularly important within partnership provision, where responsibility for standards is distributed across multiple institutions.

Unlike conventional university settings, standards are interpreted and enacted across multiple institutional actors, including partner providers and awarding bodies. In such environments, confidence in standards cannot rely solely on formal quality assurance mechanisms. Participants' accounts suggest that local knowledge of students, professional trust and contextual understanding remain important resources through which standards are interpreted and maintained. This finding highlights the continuing importance of professional judgement within distributed systems of academic governance.

Contesting Educational Value: Productivity, Quality and the Purpose of Higher Education

The most revealing disagreements concerned productivity. Participants were not ultimately debating AI itself. They were debating what higher education should value.

Some participants viewed AI positively because it improved accessibility, responsiveness and learning support, reflecting arguments advanced by Dwivedi et al. (2023) and Tlili et al. (2023). Others questioned whether efficiency should automatically be regarded as educational progress. For them, intellectual effort, reflection and critical engagement remained central to meaningful learning.

These competing perspectives point towards different understandings of educational value. One prioritises access and support; the other prioritises intellectual development and depth of engagement. Neither position rejected AI outright. Instead, they reflected different assumptions about the purposes of higher education.

From this perspective, GenAI functions less as a technological disruption than as a catalyst. It exposes longstanding tensions concerning achievement, effort and educational quality that existed long before AI entered higher education. The debate therefore extends beyond technology and raises fundamental questions about the relationship between learning, assessment and educational purpose.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to emerging scholarship on GenAI in three ways.

First, it suggests that educators' concerns extend beyond academic integrity. Although plagiarism, authorship and assessment security featured in participants' accounts, the dominant concern was confidence in learning itself. Participants were less preoccupied with whether AI had been used than with what student work could legitimately be interpreted as evidence of learning.

Second, the findings extend existing discussions of academic judgement (Sadler, 1989; Shay, 2004). Participants described making judgements not only about quality but also about credibility, authenticity and the relationship between academic outputs and learning. In doing so, they frequently relied upon contextual knowledge of students developed through ongoing interaction, observation and assessment. Academic judgement therefore appears to involve evaluating the trustworthiness of assessment evidence as well as the standard of the work itself. The study therefore suggests that academic judgement in AI-mediated environments increasingly involves evaluating the credibility of learning evidence rather than the quality of work alone.

Third, the study contributes to a relatively limited body of research examining GenAI within higher education partnership provision. The findings demonstrate how questions of authenticity, responsibility and standards are negotiated within organisational contexts characterised by multiple layers of governance and accountability (QAA, 2023; Office for Students, 2024; National Audit Office, 2024).

Taken together, these contributions suggest that the significance of GenAI lies not only in technological change but also in the pressures it places on long-established assumptions about learning, achievement, and academic standards.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings suggest that institutional responses to GenAI should move beyond a narrow focus on misconduct and detection. While concerns about academic integrity remain important, participants repeatedly described challenges relating to authenticity, learning, and confidence in assessment.

Professional judgement emerged as particularly significant. Participants relied heavily on contextual knowledge, familiarity with students and professional experience when making decisions about authenticity and achievement. This supports longstanding arguments that standards are maintained through interpretation as well as formal procedures (Sadler, 1989; Shay, 2004; Bloxham et al., 2016). Opportunities for moderation, dialogue and shared standards discussions may therefore become increasingly important as AI becomes embedded within higher education practice.

The findings also raise questions about assessment design. If polished outputs can no longer be assumed to represent learning, greater attention may need to be given to assessment approaches that make learning processes more visible. Recent work similarly argues that assessment should be redesigned for AI-mediated learning environments through approaches that strengthen validity and make expectations surrounding AI use more explicit (Perkins et al., 2025). The issue is not necessarily how to eliminate AI from assessment, but how to maintain confidence in the evidence on which academic judgements are based.

Within partnership provision, these challenges are amplified by distributed accountability structures. Maintaining confidence in standards may depend as much on shared professional understandings as on policy frameworks alone.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study was conducted within a single higher education partnership provider. While this enabled detailed exploration of a specific organisational setting, the findings should not be assumed to represent all higher education contexts.

A second limitation concerns participants. Although lecturers and Personal Academic Tutors provided valuable perspectives, other groups, including students, academic leaders, external examiners and quality assurance professionals, may experience these issues differently.

Finally, the study captures a rapidly evolving moment in higher education. Institutional responses, professional practices, and AI technologies continue to develop. Longitudinal research would therefore be valuable in exploring how educators' understandings of authenticity, judgement and standards evolve over time.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how lecturers and Personal Academic Tutors within a UK higher education partnership provider understand and respond to the growing presence of GenAI.

Although participants recognised practical benefits associated with AI, discussions consistently returned to questions of authenticity, intellectual effort, and confidence in learning. Rather than relying primarily on technological detection systems, participants placed greater trust in professional judgement, contextual knowledge and familiarity with students when evaluating academic work.

The data suggest that GenAI is reshaping the conditions under which academic judgement is exercised. In particular, educators appeared increasingly concerned with the credibility of learning evidence rather than the quality of submitted work alone. In this sense, the challenge presented by GenAI is not merely technological but epistemological, raising fundamental questions about how learning is recognised, evidenced and trusted within contemporary higher education. The issue is no longer simply whether work has been produced with AI, but whether it can still be trusted as credible evidence of learning.

Ultimately, the challenge identified by participants was not how to detect AI. It was how to sustain confidence in meaningful learning when traditional assumptions about authorship, assessment and achievement become less certain. In this sense, GenAI is not simply a technological development. It is a catalyst for renewed debate about standards, learning and the purpose of higher education itself.

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